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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Memorandum

COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
17 April 1969

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions

1. The North Korean attack on the US EC-121 aircraft, like the seizure of the Pueblo, appears to have been a unilateral action taken without advance notice to either Moscow or Peking. This state of affairs will condition Soviet and Chinese Communist attitudes and reactions to US courses of action in this situation as it did in the Pueblo crisis. There is one major difference between these two incidents, however, that complicates the problem of developing effective US responses that would produce the desired impact on North Korea and its Communist neighbors. In contrast to the Pueblo affair, which contained elements susceptible to negotiation, the present situation does not lend itself to bargaining or exchange. Moreover, the possible objectives of US actions, apart from straightforward retaliation, involve the principles of maintaining the right to use international airspace and deterrence against future such hostilities. Neither principle is particularly applicable to the North Korean problem particularly in terms of securing specific responses by Pyongyang.

2. The problem of developing meaningful and effective US courses of action is also complicated

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by the assumptions and motivations underlying North Korea's action. The Kim Il-sung regime almost certainly planned this move in advance calculating that the potential advantages in taking this risk far outweighed the dangers of possible US military reprisals. This judgment, and North Korea's evaluation of future US initiatives, probably are strongly influenced by the Korean's interpretation of the US response to the seizure of the Pueblo. Kim Il-sung evidently has persuaded himself that the US is overextended in Vietnam and elsewhere and that North Korea therefore can engage in such deliberate acts of defiance with relative impunity. The North Koreans probably made the decision to attack the reconnaissance aircraft on the assumption that there would either be no US military response or at the most only a limited one, in the nature of a one-time retaliatory action.

3. We believe that two main factors contributed to North Korea's complacent appraisal of risks. Kim Il-sung's style of rule has long been characterized by a willingness to accept risks and by a strong reliance on bluff and intimidation. He has taken pride in his militant "revolutionary" stance and has ridiculed Peking and Moscow for their caution in dealing with US power. A major theme of North Korean propaganda, particularly since the Pueblo incident, is that a determined small nation can defeat a "mighty imperialist." A more specific motivation for the shootdown probably resides in Kim Il-sung's desire to offset the failure of his attempts over the past two years to launch a so-called "people's war" in the South and to undermine and disrupt the South Korean government and economy. Kim, moreover, evidently believes his long-term ambitions regarding South Korea require a high level of tension with the US. Periodic provocations, he

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hopes, will contribute to the disillusionment of the American public with overseas burdens and bring about a reduction and eventual withdrawal of US forces from South Korea.

4. In view of these North Korean assumptions and ambitions, it is doubtful that any of the US courses of action considered below would have any decisive or lasting effects, either in achieving stated US objectives or in inducing Pyongyang to modify its long-term policies. Embassy Seoul has suggested that if the US response takes the form of a military threat or even a limited strike, "the benefits to North Korea will be manifold." A very tough populace will be spurred to greater feats of production and sacrifice, and the disputes within the North Korean leadership that have been hinted at in recent pronouncements may be stilled in the face of tangible external pressure. Such gains for the regime, in the Embassy's judgment, would outweigh the physical losses anticipated from a limited US retaliatory strike.

5. Show of force: The North Koreans probably would view actions such as demonstrative air and naval maneuvers in proximity to North Korea essentially as a repetition of the US response to the Pueblo seizure. They would be inclined to interpret such demonstrations as indicating US unwillingness to resort to any direct application of force that might carry high risks of a resumption of major hostilities. The North Koreans would attempt to extract maximum propaganda advantage from a show of force in the Military Armistice Commission forum and elsewhere. It is unlikely, however, that they would feel compelled to challenge this US air and naval presence by direct air or surface action.

6. Military actions not involving combat probably would not deter the North Koreans from increasing

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harassment and other forms of pressure in the Demilitarized Zone area. In fact, they might view an intensification of such pressure as an effective means of stimulating international concern over the danger of major hostilities, thus bringing heavy pressure to bear on the US to withdraw the show of force. We believe that there is little prospect that this course of action would induce the North Koreans to apologize publicly for the shootdown or undertake to avoid such actions in the future.

7. Military Combat Options:

We believe it is unlikely that any of these actions would accomplish the objectives of future deterrence or maintenance of the right to use international airspace. The North Koreans would use all the capabilities at their command to inflict maximum losses on any US strike forces. They would respond with virulent propaganda attacks and would mobilize the limited diplomatic assets available to them to discredit the US action and build pressure for its prompt termination. We do not believe, however, that the North Koreans would undertake major retaliatory military actions against US/South Korean military targets or civilian facilities in the South, although we cannot exclude the possibility that they might attack a target of opportunity, such as a US naval unit engaged in hostile action against North Korea.

8. Pyongyang's initial reaction probably would be to play for time in which to assess the nature of US intentions. They would seek to engage the US in protracted talks in the MAC, partly as a device to forestall further and more dangerous US reprisals and partly to exploit that forum for attracting international sympathy and support.

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9. Further clues as to North Korea's probable reaction to US combat options are provided by its behavior in the weeks immediately following the Pueblo seizure. There was a significant decline in North Korean harassment activities in the DMZ area until the late spring of 1968. A captured member of the large North Korean infiltration team that landed on South Korea's east coast last November has testified that a major seaborne infiltration operation originally scheduled for February 1968 was canceled after the seizure of the Pueblo in late January.

The USSR

10. Soviet reactions to US moves short of combat-type actions would probably be similar to those immediately after the Pueblo incident, when Soviet policy was aimed at limiting the scale of US reaction and providing strong verbal support to North Korea while keeping clear of involvement in the crisis. Moscow would probably react to US actions with some purposefully visible military preparations at the upper end of the noncombat scale, in large part because it could not be certain the US did not intend to apply direct force. We believe the USSR would be extremely careful, however, to avoid involvement with US reconnaissance aircraft and would limit itself to shadowing a US naval show of force in the Sea of Japan. If Moscow concluded that this was the extent of the US reaction, it would probably be satisfied to confine its response to a stream of propaganda abuse.

11. Soviet reaction to US combat actions would, of course, be stronger. The nature and extent of the reaction would depend largely on what type of move the US made and especially on whether or not the Soviets felt it was a one-shot action or one of a series of moves which would ultimately threaten the existence of the North Korean regime. The Soviets would probably be skeptical of any US assurances that no further actions were contemplated, but their desire to avoid involvement would probably induce them to adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

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12. If US actions included the sinking of a North Korean patrol craft or the downing of an aircraft outside Korean territory, Moscow could be expected to denounce the US and press for United Nations actions condemning the US and demanding that it terminate such actions. Moscow might also feel compelled to announce through Red Star or some similar medium the increased combat readiness of Soviet Far Eastern forces and to make much of the fact that the US actions occurred in proximity to Soviet borders. This would be calculated to impress on the US the seriousness of Moscow's concern and to deter further US actions.

13. Raids in force across the DMZ or similar measures that threatened to lead to major hostilities would doubtless call for a stronger Soviet response. Moscow would probably feel it necessary to augment naval and air units in the Sea of Japan and would certainly increase its military readiness. The Soviets might well provide equipment to North Korea on a crash basis as a demonstration of their commitment to the mutual assistance treaty. Moscow, however, probably would accompany such measures with counsels of restraint to the North Koreans, although the effectiveness of Soviet influence would be questionable.

14. An action of longer duration, such as a naval blockade or mining of ports, would create the greatest possibility of a US-Soviet confrontation. Moscow would certainly feel such actions so close to its borders would call for a significant demonstration of military preparedness and strength in the area. The Soviets would probably interpret such moves as a challenge to themselves as well as to the Koreans. We think Moscow would still attempt to avoid a military confrontation, but in view of increased Soviet presence in the area, the risk of unintended or accidental US-Soviet clashes would be increased even if the Russians made no attempt to challenge a blockade directly.

Communist China

15. Peking's reaction to noncombat military actions probably would closely follow the lines set in China's cautious treatment of the Pueblo affair.

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In view of the strained relations between Peking and Pyongyang, the Chinese would have little incentive to provide more than a routine verbal display of support for North Korea and denunciation of the US. Noncombat US actions probably would be interpreted by Peking as confirming its over-all view of US policy, particularly its conviction that the US is unwilling to face the risks of major military escalation in either Korea or Vietnam.

16. US combat type actions would reinforce Peking's extreme caution. The Chinese leaders almost certainly would not feel bound by their treaty with North Korea to undertake a military response and they probably would even be reluctant to provide more than token military assistance. There is no reason to believe that the Chinese would be any less determined to avoid a direct military confrontation with the US in this situation than they were in the Pueblo crisis. Peking, of course, would be alert to exploit any signs of North Korean dissatisfaction with Moscow's reaction and support and an opening of this kind might result in more generous material assistance than the Chinese would otherwise be disposed to provide.

North Vietnam

17. The Hanoi leaders probably would have ambivalent feelings regarding the implications of US actions in Korea. Hanoi radio quickly praised the North Koreans for their "glorious achievement" in downing the US aircraft. The North Vietnamese probably would interpret a noncombat response as further evidence for their long-cherished conviction that the US is overextended in Vietnam and cannot contemplate a wider conflict. They would also hope that the Korean incident would further fuel the fires of American public discontent with the Vietnam war. On the other hand, Hanoi is very sensitive to the danger that North Korean provocations might precipitate a vigorous US military reaction that would have the effect of deflecting public attention from the Vietnam struggle and enable the US administration to adopt a more demanding military and negotiating posture.

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South Korea

18. The Seoul government probably would display the same frustration and uneasiness regarding noncombat actions that marked its reaction to the US handling of the Pueblo crisis. Any public expression of this dissatisfaction, however, would be tempered by Seoul's recognition that one of Pyongyang's major objectives is to shake South Korean confidence in US protection and to drive a wedge between South Korea and the US. Combat-type actions, on the other hand, would be warmly welcomed by Seoul as evidence of a major change in the US attitude toward North Korean pressure and provocations. South Korea might press the US to go beyond these measures and undertake at least a limited joint ground assault across the DMZ aimed at inflicting a highly damaging military and political defeat.

General World Reaction

19. As in the case of the Pueblo, the great majority of nations and governments will regard this aircraft incident as largely irrelevant to their interests and security. They will discern no major international principle which requires them to become involved in any significant way. Their main preoccupation will be the danger of some chain of events that might lead to a confrontation between the US and the USSR.

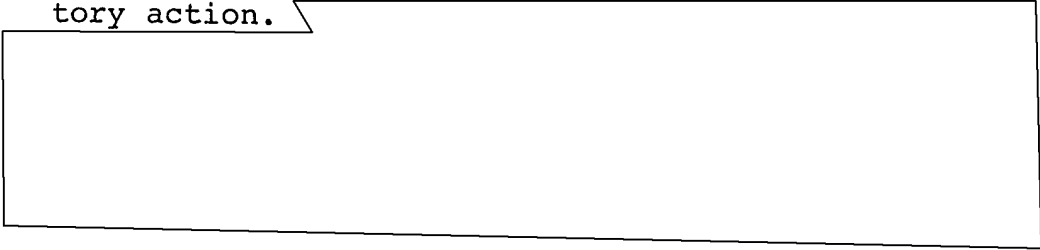
20. Most American allies in West Europe would be prepared to provide public support for any US diplomatic initiatives, on the ground that the North Koreans had violated international law, but they would be alarmed at any move toward military retaliation for what they regard as a relatively minor episode in the cold war. They would avoid association with the use or the threat of force and might try to bring pressure to bear on the US if they judged such US action to be imminent.

21. In general, Latin American opinion would follow that of Western Europe. Most of these nations would be willing to support the US up to a point, but to them, the shoot-down and its possible

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consequences would seem remote from their interests and security. Most nations in Africa and in non-Communist Asia would tend to adopt a plague-on-both-houses attitude, and their double-standard neutralism would tend to make them view US reprisals as a form of "colonial" pressure. Nationalist China, South Vietnam and Thailand, of course, would voice support for the US in varying degrees of firmness. Japan would be extremely sensitive to any use of homeland or Okinawan bases as staging areas for US retaliatory action.



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